DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 196 058 CS 503 153

AUTHOR Cornish, Roger N.
TITLE The One-Act Play--Toward a Set of Precepts.
PUB DATE Aug 80
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Theatre Association (44th, San Diego, CA, August 10-13, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Dramatics: Higher Education; *Literary Devices; *Playwriting; Scripts; Theater Arts; Theories
IDENTIFIERS *One Act Plays

ABSTRACT

In spite of the importance of the one-act play as an art form and as a tool for teaching playwriting, authors of playwriting texts have devoted little space to the study of the form. Because of this neglect, there is no definition of the form that is simple and specific enough to undergrid efforts to teach or write it. In the absence of a solid definition, consideration of a number of precepts associated with one-acts may offer the beginning playwright useful guidance. The first precept, singleness of incident, while universal in one-act definitions, may be so complex as to seem like several incidents. Many examples of successful one-act plays that do not abide by the singleness of incident rule suggest that the novice may have trouble using it. The second and third precepts are observance of the unities of time and place and of unbroken action. Satisfactory one-act plays seem to derive their effect from a continuously developing crisis which its audience experiences without pause for contemplation. The fourth precept, late point of attack, is the point in the implicit sequence of events at which the actual play begins. The last precept, rapid attack, is the point within the play when the conflict is presented to the audience and should come near the beginning of the play. (HTH)

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THE ONE-ACT PLAY - TOWARD A SET OF PRECEPTS

Roger N. Cornish

The declared topic of this panel is playwriting theory. My presentation will spring from premises about that phrase that I ought to state. Playwriting I take to refer to the process of getting the play on paper, not the analysis and interpretation of it thereafter. My remarks, therefore, will not be in the main critical. I will neither describe nor evaluate works except in passing.

Theory I take to mean a body of laws pertaining to a given area of knowledge. They are laws in the sense that, having been validated by test or observation, they have passed beyond mere hypothesis into the realm of general acceptance by experts in that area of knowledge. But, in art as in science, such laws are not immutable; further observation may disclose phenomena that invalidate them. And because they are laws pertaining to art, they can only be taken statistically. That is, a law pertaining to the doing of art must be supposed to mean something like this: if Law A is followed, the work of art will usually be improved, and, if it is ignored, the work will usually suffer. Thus, in a discussion of playwriting theory, we are talking about a body of precepts that one would do well to follow, though genius or good luck may flaut them and still achieve success.

With this much in mind, it remains to point out that such a body of rules about doing art is obviously most useful to the beginner, who

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learns rules, in part, so that he may later break them advisedly rather than accidentally. So the discussion of playwriting theory inevitably comes down to the teaching of playwriting. That is, we can best measure playwriting theory in terms of its likely value to students; successful playwrights have already come to terms with it or can do without it. Thus it is that I will from time to time talk about precepts in terms of their usefulness to the student.

My topic is the one-act play and the precepts that may be applied to its writing. The importance of the one-act form requires little defense. Elementary playwriting classes are usually built around the writing of a one-act play. Although there are exceptions, most writers of playwriting texts assume that the full length is simply too difficult for the beginner. Samuel Selden summarized it well when he said that the three act play is not three times but nine time harder to write. And Certainly the number of important playwrights, such as O'Neill, Williams, Ionesco, and Albee, who developed their craft on the one-acter suggests that it is a good beginning.

But the ultimate justification of the one-act is the rich modern stage literature that it has produced, from Riders to the Sea and Miss Julie to The Zoo Story and The Transformation of Benno Blimpie. As Edward Albee recently put it at a New York symposium of the Dramatists Guild, "the one-act play is a serious art form."

Despite its obvious importance, however, the authors of playwriting manuals devote little space to its characteristics and demands. In the classic Playmaking (1912), Archer did not deal with the one-act. Neither did George Pierce Baker in his equally revered Dramatic Technique (1919).

Between the Wars, however, several writers did pay significant attention to the one-act as a form requiring some special discipline. Lewis, Wilde, Hillebrand, and Kozlenko all devoted entire books to the study of the one-act form. Since that period, however, though there have been many anthologies of one-acts, there have been no full scale studies of the form, and texts devoted to the craft of playwriting have generally given it short shrift.

For instance, Lawson, Greenwood, Galloway, Egri, MacGowan, and Smiley more or less deemphasize the one-act, perhaps on the assumption that the principles they discuss apply equally to long and short forms. Grebanier is an exception in that he devotes a chapter to the one-act, but most who have written instructional books on playwriting have tended to ignore the form which students are most likely to be attempting.

Perhaps most disconcerting to one interested in the technique of the one-act is the fact that there doesn't seem to be available a definition of the form that is both simple and specific enough to undergird efforts to

teach or write it. The Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms defines one-acter as "a play consisting of one act," a tautology which, unfortunately, offers as much help as most playwriting texts, which tend either to ignore it or leave it undefined. The same can be said in general for anthologies of one-acts.

The few definitions offered tend to break down because their terms are themselves undefineable. For instance, the Guide to Play Selection of the National Council of Teachers of English offers: "a short play giving a single unified impression, tending to emphasize either character, or plot, or atmosphere. It usually deals with a single incident." This is not bad, but single incident is a term so relative as to defy pinning down. To one student the phrase may suggest a cup of coffee at the student union, to another the Battle of Waterloo. Indeed, successful one-act plays demonstrate the breadth a single incident may legitimately encompass. If we wish to take single incident narrowly, we may point to such a play as The Zoo Story. On the other hand, a single incident may be so complex as to seem like several incidents, as in Riders to the Sea, in which the single incident of Maurya's final suffering consists of several parts, including the independently developed news of two sons' deaths. This uncertain quality that clouds the idea of the single incident makes it very difficult to give a student the feel of a one-act subject. But it is single incident or some variation thereof that lies at the center of most definitions offered for the one-act play. Selden and Grebanier use the phrase itself. Hillebrand calls for "a single

effect of action;" Box calls for "singleness of theme . . . [and] singleness of situation;" and Rowe and Wilde call for unity and economy, terms which are themselves mysteries to the beginning writer.

None of this is meant to condemn these authors. Nor will I attempt the definitive definition. The fact is that so various are successful one-acts that the form defies definition. Indeed, this was one major conclusion of the two symposia on short forms sponsored by the Dramatists Guild last year. Half a dozen of our most successful one-act playwrights broke down under the task of defining the one-act. Edward Albee, moderator of the second symposium, summarized the matter thus: "I don't think there are any real definitions of what a one-act play is, no definition of its length, of its subject matter, of its structure, merely that it happens to be in one act." So we return to our tautology --a one-acter is a play in one act.

Lacking a solid definition then, what may we hope to accomplish? I should think it would be instructive to consider a number of precepts that have been associated with one-acts and consider whether, indeed, these precepts offer the beginning playwright much useful guidance. In the remainder of my remarks, therefore, I shall consider pointers offered by various writers and, with an eye to some of the more successful plays, suggest a tentative evaluation for each of them.

Before proceeding, however, I must state one limitation which is, perhaps, artificial, but still necessary to this discussion. It is this: henceforth my remarks must be taken as applying to plays, not sketches. I would define the sketch as does Bernard Grebanier, who calls it "a presentation of an incident without a plot." In The Anatomy of Drama, Alan Thompson also implies a differentiation between the one-act play and the sketch when he describes a category of one-act play that may be a mere "character sketch," adding that "interest may be sustained for twenty or thirty minutes by oddities of personality or local color."

By ignoring the sketch, I don't mean to denigrate it. There are many fine pieces in that category, and some important playwrights have worked in it, notably Tennessee Williams who, in the process of producing many one-acts, has divided his attention between true plays and sketches. If one examines his collection of 13 short plays, 27 Wagons Full of Cotton, one finds that six of the pieces are complete plays with plot action that includes crisis and climax, and the other seven are sketches in which the on stage events are not significant except as a pretext for revealing the past or developing static characterization. As I have said, this division implies no evaluation. Some of the Williams sketches, notably The Long Goodby and Portrait of a Madonna, are fine and very playable. Conversely, some of the complete plays are of little merit; indeed, Auto da fe, a rough exercise in grand guignol, and The Purification, a pretentious tragedy in overwrought verse, would only be produced today as object lessons to the effect that even great playwrights have to start with

failure.

I will not deal with the sketch because, first, the most important points I will consider relate to significant dramatic action, that thing the sketch lacks, and, second, because I consider that, as a teaching device, the sketch should be avoided in favor of the true play. I would want every student to come out of a first playwriting course with, at a bare minimum, a sense of basic dramatic structure. By that I mean at least a theoretical mastery of a structure that includes the introduction of a problem, a struggle to solve it, and a meaningful conclusion that happens on stage and comes about for a reason. Without that sense of dramatic structure, the student will be ill prepared to move from the short play to the full length, a realm in which the plotless sketch has no chance for success.

The precepts for one-act plays that we shall now consider are: singleness of incident or situation (which we have already discussed at some length); unity of time and place; unbroken action; late point of attack; minimal exposition; and an early introduction of the question or early attack.

The prinicple of the single incident we have already discussed. It is an almost universal precept among writers on one-act technique but, as I have pointed out, is so contingent on one's interpretation of the concept of an incident that beginners are likely to find it of little help. Besides, the requirement of the single incident seems to refer more to the

choice of the subject than the technique of developing one's play. That is, one is likely to have the main incident in mind before one starts writing. This is precisely the point where the beginner has the least ability to see his project clearly. Hillebrand speaks of this first planning period thus: " . . . the idea must be manageable, that is, amenable to treatment in one act." He continues with this caveat: "This point ought not to require much discussion, although I find it causes a great deal of trouble to beginners."

Finally, however sound the single incident precept may be, the literature of the one-act play offers good examples of successful plays which do not abide by it. In Something Unspoken by Tennessee Williams, two clearly independent incidents contribute to a single unified plot: in one, Cornelia is defeated in her run for the Regency of the Confederate Daughters; in the second, she is rebuffed by her secretary-companion, Grace, when she reaches for truly intimate human contact. In the manner of a complex full length play, the two incidents share time and space and reach a climax within moments of each other. In O'Neill's fine melodrama, Ile, a whaling captain puts down a ship's mutiny before applying the same brutality to the desparate needs of his wife. While the primary purpose of the mutiny may be character development, it is nevertheless a developed dramatic conflict which might in itself serve as the unifying incident of a one-act play. In short, the one incident rule is a good one if one recognizes that it may be broken with impunity by the clever playwright and that the novice is likely to have trouble

making use of it.

A second precept put forth for the one-act is that it should observe the unities of time and place. Morris Sweetkind, the anthologer, says "the one-act play invariably preserves the so-called unities of time, place, and action." (The latter we have already considered.) And Grebanier will not accept a play as a valid one-act unless it presents continuous action, on the grounds that any time break implies that the play presents more than one incident. (Indeed, at this afternoon's playwriting workshop, Sam Smiley called it a great mistake to break a one-act.) In my own classes, I often exhort beginners to observe the unities of time and place, not out of some concern for absolute rules, but because I believe they will develop faster if they force themselves to create within the austerity of a set of characters who work out the premise of the play without the aid of television's easy mobility.

But it is quite obvious that any precept about the unity of time can only be taken in a limited way: there are far too many plays such as Williams'es 27 Wagons Full of Cotton or Noel Coward's Still Life (better known as the film Brief Encounter) which achieve great success as multi-scene one-acts.

Though the unity of time seems less than essential, observing the unity of place may be crucial. Everyone agrees on the obvious point that a one-act play should have no intermission. But the student must be

advised that the change of locale, if the play is realistic and the change therefore requires scene shifting, may have the same effect on an audience as an intermission. A satisfactory one-act play seems to achieve its effect by a continuously developing crisis which its audience experiences without pause for contemplation or even breath. During the interval sufficient for a major scenery shift, that audience may let slip the breathless attention and the play may fail to get it back. If a one-act play is aimed at a singleness of impact it cannot pause for the passage of real time, although it may well safely skip over some story time. (The distinction between story time and real time is an important one for students, especially those whose contact with the short story or screenplay has given them the sense that real time does not exist in imaginative writing--stage time is real.) 27 Wagons has three scenes and Still Life has five, but the only real time lost between the scenes is the time required for lighting changes. That interval a one-act can stand, but otherwise we might sum up our remarks on the unities of time and place by saying, "do what you want, but don't let the action stop long enough for the audience to look at its watches."

Several writers have advanced the precept that the one-act play ought to have a late point of attack. Kenneth MacGowan says "the one-acter has to begin late in its story." Paul Levitt (in A Structural Approach to the Analysis of Drama) says "there can be little doubt that the brevity of the one-act form encourages a late point of attack."

To quickly define point of attack, let's say that it is the moment within the basic story line at which the play proper commences. For instance, Hamlet begins after some story events, notably the murder of Hamlet's father and the marriage of his uncle and mother, but before most of the important story events, which, therefore, may occur on stage. Thus, we say Hamlet has an early point of attack as opposed to, say, Oedipus Rex, which has a late point of attack, most of the important story events having already occurred when the curtain rises.

In general, the precept that a one-act should have a late point of attack seems quite sound. A late point of attack starts a play close to its climax (in story time if not in real time) which at least feels like a faster way to go about things. But it's not quite that simple. By the nature of things, a late point of attack tends to require a large amount of exposition--that which is not shown must be told of--and exposition itself may retard the rapid development of a play. Walter Eaton specifically calls for the one-acter to be "relatively free of exposition."

Though I tend to agree that a late point of attack is best for the one-act play, the literature does not encourage one to turn the idea into a strict rule. Some outstanding one-acts have very early points of attack, tell virtually the entire story on stage. Coward's Still Life is an example, as is his delightful We Were Dancing, a one-act musical that

presents an entire love affair from the first fine rapture to disillusion and parting within the space of half an hour (real time.) In fact, there seems to be a whole category of stories which become good early point of attack one-acts--the meeting of strangers story. The Zoo Story, The Indian Wants the Bronx, and similar plays are able to bring us in at the birth of a story and carry us to a climax within a single short act precisely because the opposing characters have no shared history which must be revealed by lengthy exposition.

Perhaps the point of attack is more a factor of the playwright's general working personality than anything else. Every student of modern drama knows that mature Ibsen plays start from a late point of attack and the major Checkhov plays all employ an early point of attack. But it may be worth noting that Ibsen's only one-acter. The Warrior's Barrow, employs a late point of attack whereas Checkhov may be seen to employ a relatively early one in such a one-act farce as The Marriage Proposal.

Suffice it to say that, although point of attack is perhaps the first technical decision that any playwright has to make, we can in no way give it the status of a fixed rule for the one-act play.

The last possible precept we shall consider is the one to the effect that one-act plays need an early introduction of the question or a rapid attack. (I apologize for the apparent confusion of terms. Point of

attack and attack are quite different things. There is no substitute term for the former and, though there are for the latter, it is so common in the context of our discussion that I chose it over such other possibilities as collision or catalytic event.) I use the word attack the way Samuel Selden uses it. To Selden, the attack is the second of the play's five main parts. A play begins with a period of preparation, however long or short, in which the audience is given essential background; then follows the attack, the event, usually some sort of discovery by the main character, that starts the struggle, the third main part of the play. In other words, the attack introduces the play's central conflict.

Selden himself implies that the attack should come quickly in that he prescribes for the one-act a brief period of preparation. John Gassner, in his 1936 essay, "Toward a One-Act Theatre," agrees: " . . . the shorter form requires brief preparation, quicker attack." More recently, the same idea was supported during the deliberations of the Dramatists Guild. Terence McNally suggested that the essential quality of the one-act is "an action that sort of starts at the very top, and you want to see it to its conclusion almost as quickly as possible . . . a strong action that you begin with almost the first beat of the play."

David Mamet put the same idea this way: " . . . the short form is a continuous action towards the solution of the problem that is presented at the start of the play,"

We may take this to mean that the attack in a one-act play, whether the play runs fifteen minutes or an hour, should come within the first few minutes after the curtain goes up. Though any such precept must be taken as breakable, there are sound reasons for presenting it to beginning playwrights. Many young writers in an elementary playwriting class have previously written short stories in creative writing courses. Quite often they have been praised and received high marks for nicely turned out pieces that catch mood, character, or environment with sensitivity and believeability. But those same pieces may lack central conflict, suspense, and climax. Many short stories succeed without those things, as may the kind of play we have called the sketch. But the student who follows this path in the one-act will not, as I have said, digest the principles of dramatic construction he will need for the multi-act play. Thus, it seems appropriate to push such students beyond sensitive observation to the chance taking that is dramatic action. The sooner they come to grips with central conflict in their class plays, the more likely they are to develop them to satisfying conclusions. Thus, the precept that calls for the attack to be launched within the first few minutes may have real pedagogic value.

So, the quick attack has wide support and evident advantages. But can we offer it as an absolute rule? I doubt it. It seems to me that such an extraordinarily successful one-act play as The Zoo Story can be read as a play with a very slow attack. Although Jerry makes Peter uncomfortable

and disturbs him throughout the entire play, it is only in the last ten minutes or so of this rather long one-acter that the life and death struggle of the play, the absolute necessity for Jerry to touch Peter or die, is revealed in unmistakeable colors. The texture of the dialogue and the rich character contrast between the two men make the play so interesting and compelling that the late launching of the main conflict seems not to be a drawback, but merely an effective way to get a strong theatrical conclusion and make the piece a true play with complete dramatic impact.

It seems to me that I have run away from every possible conclusion that I might have offered about the one-acter. And this despite the fact that I have been thinking about one-act plays for a long time and looking hard for those definitive things which might be said about them. But perhaps that is only as it should be in the discussion of an art form. There are no art absolutes worth talking about. A one-act play is a play in one act.

On the other hand, the precepts we have discussed do have their value, especially for the beginner. It probably is good to seek a single incident--if you can decide what such a thing is; it is probably also good to work within a unifying framework of time and place; a late point of attack is probably helpful, especially if it can be managed without the burden of too much exposition; and an early launching of the central conflict--within the first few minutes if possible--will probably enhance the play.

But if we are teachers, we must be sure that this sort of advice is given without the weight of absolute law. And if we are writers, we must see the guidelines not as tracks we can't leave without a crash, but as paths that, having taken other people where we want to go, may take us there as well. Yet, if we have a sufficiently clear view of our destinations and never lose sight of true north, we can step off the path, walk on the grass, and still get where we want to go.

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